

Wellness Articles

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If you would like to be added to the distribution list for these articles, please email: Rebecca.johnson2@albertahealthservices.ca. You will receive a monthly email containing articles for the upcoming four weeks.

An archive of past wellness articles is available at <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/9966.asp>

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Alzheimer's Awareness Month

September marks Alzheimer's Awareness month, a time designated to raise awareness of the effects and signs of Alzheimer's disease in our loved ones and what we can do to support them.

Alzheimer's disease is the most common type of dementia, a syndrome that affects memory, thinking, orientation, judgment and ability to carry out everyday tasks. It is estimated that by 2038, about one in 10 Albertans over the age of 65 and nearly half over the age of 90 will be living with some form of dementia.

Dementia has certain warning signs. Contact your doctor if you notice a loved one having increased difficulty with any of the following:

- Learning and retaining new information
- Handling complex tasks, like balancing a cheque book
- Knowing what to do when problems come up
- Finding his or her way around familiar places, driving to and from places he or she knows well
- Finding the right words to say what he or she wants to say
- Understanding and responding to what he or she sees and hears
- Acting more irritable or suspicious than usual, or withdrawing from conversation and activity.

Finally, here are some tips in communicating with anyone who may have dementia:

- First, make sure the person does not have a hearing or vision problem. Sometimes a person may not respond to you because he or she cannot hear you. Not being able to see well may make the person more confused, agitated, or

withdrawn. If you suspect a problem, have a health professional evaluate the person's hearing and vision.

- Don't argue. Offer reassurance, and try to distract the person or focus his or her attention on something else.
- Use short, simple, familiar words and sentences. Present only one idea at a time. And avoid talking about abstract concepts.
- Explain your actions. Break tasks and instructions into clear, simple steps, offered one step at a time.
- Pay attention to your tone of voice. Be calm and supportive. A person with dementia is still aware of emotions and may become upset upon sensing anger or irritation in your voice.
- Maintain eye contact and use touch to reassure and show that you are listening. Touch may be better understood than words. Holding the person's hand or putting an arm around his or her shoulder may get through when nothing else can.
- Pay attention to the person's tone of voice and gestures for clues as to what the person is feeling. Sometimes the emotion is more important than what is said.
- Do not confront the person about his or her denial of the disease. Arguments will not help either of you.
- Continue to treat the person with dignity and respect.
- Allow choices in daily activities. Let the person select his or her clothing, activities, and foods. But too many choices can be overwhelming. Offer a choice of two to three options, not the whole range of possibilities.

In Alberta, services are readily available for both those suffering from any form of dementia and their caregivers. The Alzheimer Society of Alberta and the Northwest Territories provide education and ongoing support.

Albertans can also call Health Link at 811 for advice. Health Link will assess the needs of the person and provide immediate advice for their concerns, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. When needed, callers can be referred to Dementia Advice, which is staffed by specialized dementia nurses.